



### Narasirato at home in Solomon Islands

Narasirato combine all this with soaring vocals, funky dance routines and contemporary influences that range from stacking various panpipes together to including elements of blues, reggae and rock heard on shortwave radio, in Honiara or on their international travels.

Here in electricity-free Oterama — accessible only by boat, dug-out canoe or a two-day walk overland — the musical diet is largely bamboo music, a bit of guitar and the sort of traditional Melanesian choir singing featured in *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malik's film about the battle of Guadalcanal.

"Prophetic words of the sea," chorus Narasirato in Are'are as, puffing and sweating, we reach a hibiscus-strewn green ringed by thatched huts. There on thong-o-phone is Aitakara, his teeth stained red by betelnut; log drummer Andrew Manerou, who after falling for heavy metal music in Denmark has written Slayer across the back of his sleeveless denim shirt; Ma'asinorao, the only non-Oteramian, who has paddled two hours in a dug-out canoe to be here.

"He looks after all his people," sings Ma'asinorao, his characterful tenor sailing over trancey bass-driven backing. "He expects the sea to calm down." This song, *Warato'o*, is the title track of the group's new album, recorded in Amsterdam last year. The creative team is ecstatic that it took them just 48 hours to make a record.

"I'm still shocked by how professional and fat it sounds," says Mayall. The band members say it's all down to their supreme spiritual belief system. To *Warato'o* himself.

As indeed is finding a stellar new frontman after their previous lead singer jumped

ship in Melbourne in 2009, and securing a well-connected new international manager after their previous international manager quit. *Warato'o* may well have had something to do with their touring grant from Strummerville, the Joe Strummer Foundation for New Music, as well as their international acclaim, the performance-related sunshine and of course, our safe arrival.

"We believe that things happen for a reason," says Manuasi once the entire village has decamped to the Culture House, an open-sided structure built on a hill overlooking the village; once we've sat through an hour of speeches and shaken hands with everyone. "That reason is *Warato'o*."

More than a hundred pairs of eyes watch us, fascinated. Those whose eyes we catch smile and wave. Everyone here belongs to one of several extended families, which belong in turn to one of four different Are'are tribes who came down from the mountains to live by the sea in 1981. Like other villages along this remote stretch of coastline, Oterama converted to the Catholicism brought in by Christian missionaries at the end of the 19th century. "*Warato'o* and God go hand in hand," says Manuasi.

"The Catholic missionaries didn't try to stop our beliefs or our panpipe music," he adds. "Or at least not like other missionaries did." (The South Seas Evangelical Church discourages Are'are panpipe performances, which it believes worships spirit devils.)

"We were head hunters until the 1800s," says village elder Albert Hauheri, 63, a roving primary schoolteacher. "But we became a British protectorate [1889-1978] and they introduced hanging, we stopped." He nods toward the rainforest. "There are tribes in the bush, tribes whose languages we don't know, who still worship the skulls of their ancestors at tambu [sacred sites]. But here in Oterama things are changing. The outside is creeping in."

He pauses. "But this is a good number of people for a village," he says. "Everyone looks after each other. If there are problems we try and solve them together. For our young men, Narasirato is a blessing; without this band these boys would be drinking kwassa [local hooch], thieving, smoking marijuana. The group gives them a focus."

It has done so, on and off and with differing line-ups, for decades. In 1991 the Narasirato Pan Pipe Association was founded as a way of affording disaffected Are'are youth the chance to learn about their culture. The group based themselves in Honiara like thousands of other Malaitans, from where they were wheeled out at Commonwealth-type events everywhere from Canada to Taiwan.

But when ethnic tensions erupted in 1997, sparking a six-year period of civil unrest (and an Australian-led intervention), they went back to Oterama and broke up.

When they reformed again in 2006 it was with support from former members John Maneniaru (now the MP for West Are'are) and Narasirato Association president John Bosco Houanihau along with former Australia Council fellow Peter Keelan, who was researching Melanesian panpipes when a series of events led him, *Warato'o*-like, to Narasirato. With Keelan as their international manager the band toured Australia four times; released the album *Cry of the Ancestors*, built the Culture House and kick-started an eco-tourist project.

"My personal aim was to support the

ethical and sustainable development of their plans," Keelan, 54, emails from Perth. "All of which relied on them having an income from touring outside their country."

Buoyed by the emergence of several key young musicians and a work ethic that still sees them practise every morning and evening (with a barefoot soccer friendly each afternoon), Narasirato upped their game. They spoke to the media of low-lying villages so affected by rising sea levels that people now paddle their canoes around at high tide. They sang songs such as *Rawako*, which tells of a flying fox struggling to survive in a forest decimated by logging.

"Logging is causing conflict in our community," says Manuasi of an industry whose frantic pace and mismanagement has seen regional and international organisations repeatedly warn successive Solomon Islands governments of its negative effects.

"Somebody greedy is causing problems for us, right now."

With four tribes laying claim to different tracts of forest around Oterama, it is up to each chief to decide how they are used. Today one such chief is in Honiara, being wooed by logging company representatives intent on swapping cash for logs.

Narasirato underline the urgency of their situation by wearing traditional outfits and warrior paint onstage. But when, in 2009, they burst on to the stage at the Melbourne Recital Centre, the final act of the Australasian World Music Expo, delegate Jason Mayall wasn't quite sure what he was seeing.

"They came on whooping and pounding their big bamboo, all painted up as savages straight out of the jungle," he says. "I couldn't tell if they were real or some sort of tourist band. Their music intrigued me; it sounded as if a bunch of tapes had washed up in a trunk on a desert island. They turned out to be genuinely great entertainers."

Keelan was immediately inundated with offers from big international festivals. Then, during the subsequent national tour, Narasirato's married lead singer went missing with a woman he'd met in Melbourne. Non-plussed, the members of Narasirato informed Keelan they had a replacement singer named Aloysius ready at home. But despite all the hard work he'd put in, Keelan resigned.

"I'd been confronted about the ethical issues surrounding bringing a group of traditional men from a remote tropical paradise into our First World environment," he writes. "In the end I felt deeply for this man's wife and children, that I had indeed been a part of impacting negatively on his traditional culture."

Mayall, liaising with Houanihau, brought the band to Fuji Rock in Japan: "I told them they had to rock, which they did in the extreme. Aloysius lit up the crowd with his enthusiasm. And the sun shone.

"They were passionate about wanting to tour again," he says. "I didn't make any promises. They said that whatever I could do would be most welcome. That it was up to *Warato'o*."

A friend of Joe Strummer, legendary former frontman of English rockers the Clash, Mayall submitted a funding proposal to Strummerville, the British-based charity set up after Strummer's death in 2002 to support projects that help change the world through music: "Joe was a humanitarian and environmentalist. He would have loved what Narasirato are about. I can just see him here, playing his guitar under the stars, enjoying village life."

"We did not know Joe Strummer," says Manuasi, pulling his Strummerville T-shirt — with its red, green and gold logo — over his head for another band photo shoot. "But we are glad that his spirit is here, helping the world know about us."

After WOMADelaide and the release of *Warato'o*, Narasirato are counting on more tours, a growing fan base, a future. There is talk of using income raised to build a solar-powered recording facility, a creative hub for local bands and musicians and a destination for overseas artists and eco-tourists after some jungle serenity.

"If people are respectful, then they should come," says Manuasi, as the other members of Narasirato raise their brows and nod backwards in agreement. "But there are two problems. One is finding us." He flashes a grin. "The other is not wanting to leave."

**Narasirato**, WOMADelaide March 9–12. *Warato'o* is available worldwide on iTunes in March.

## JOE STRUMMER WOULD HAVE LOVED WHAT NARASIRATO ARE ABOUT

JASON MAYALL

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